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HAYDEN, W. R.

The discovery of ether.  
The Bostonian, January 1896.

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Ether Monument in the Public Garden, Boston

# THE BOSTONIAN


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## THE Discovery of ETHER

BY WM. R. HAYDEN, M. D.

HE present age is an age of marvels, whose magnitude and grandeur are greater than the conception of man, while they are products of men, guided by that Supreme Power which fills our souls with awe and veneration. Within the memory of many persons now living, thought and science have unlocked and exposed to the vision of the world the secrets and the treasures of the sphere of *causes*.

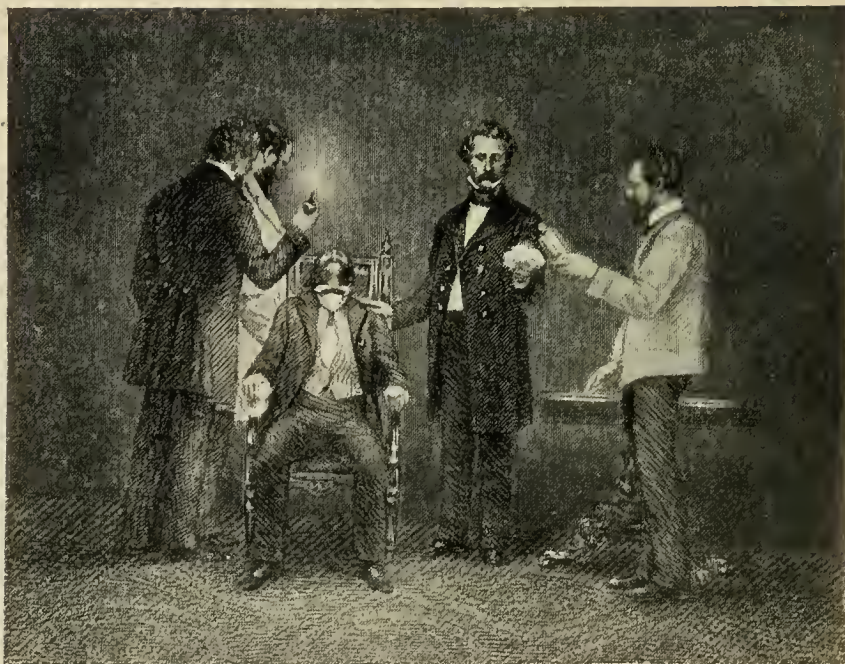
We live on the plane of *effects*, *en rapport* with the spiritual world. All that is comes from the invisible, and in due course of time returns whence it came, having

served its purpose in the world of *effects*. The study and the observation of the phenomena presented to us leads us directly from the physical to the *spiritual*, and we learn the true sources of inspiration and Divine wisdom.

In the last century, greater progress and developments have been made than in ages before. Mind has gained the mastery over matter, and subjected its atoms to its will; and all for the ultimate happiness of the race. All the wonders of to-day are but stepping-stones, leading up to the temple of spiritual existence and immortality.

God sends his chosen messengers to his children, laden with the choicest blessings. Morse, Bell, and Morton have done more for





The Operation by which was made the First Discovery of the Anæsthetic Powers of Ether

the progress of the world in the last fifty years,—for the advancement of the human family,—than millions of men who preceded them, and they have opened the gates for greater work to follow.

This brief introductory brings me to the subject which I have chosen for this paper,—a biographical sketch of William Thomas Green Morton, M. D., and a condensed history of the discovery of Anæsthesia, the greatest benefaction ever given to man; for in that discovery was the mastery of *pain*, and, in part, mental anguish.

On the nineteenth day of August, 1819, in the little town of Charlton, on the rough, rugged Berkshire hills, in the county of Worcester, was born one whose mission surpassed in practical blessing all that ever came before. Acute pain is the sharpest of all misery, and the power to control

it a divine gift beside which all other gifts pale; and which no other man may ever hope to equal.

The Mortons were originally from Salem, Mass. Willie Morton was a very studious boy, and at the age of thirteen years his father sent him to an academy at Oxford, Mass., where he was to live in the family of Dr. Pierce, an old friend of his mother's family. It was here that the bent of the boy's mind was first discovered in his love for the study of medical works in Dr. Pierce's library, where he spent much of his leisure time; and he was often found in his rambles seeking geological specimens, minerals, and choice stones in the dry beds of the mountain streams.

After leaving school young Morton entered his father's store as an assistant, and later was employed in the publication office of Mrs. Sarah J. Hale, the authoress,

who became his warm friend, and so remained to the end of his life. In August, 1840, he attained his majority, and the same month he entered the Baltimore College of Dental Surgery, as a student,

tween the two men, I will give an extract of a letter from Dr. Wells to Dr. Morton, dated November 22, 1843:

"We can both of us see at a glance that it is madness for us to go ahead

*Hartford Oct-20. 1846*

*Dr Morton Dear Sir Your letter dated yesterday is just received, and I hasten to answer it for fear you will adopt a method in disposing of your rights which will defeat your object. Before you make any arrangements whatever, I wish to see you. I think I will be in Boston the first of next week, probably Monday night. If the operation of administering the gas is not attended with too much trouble and will produce the effect you state it will undoubtedly be a fortune to you provided it is rightly managed.*

*Yours in haste*

*H. Wells*

Fac-simile of Dr. Wells's Letter

where he remained eighteen months, and became an expert in dentistry.

In 1842, in company with Horace Wells, of Hartford, Conn., he opened an office in Boston (the same Dr. Wells who afterwards claimed the discovery of etherization). In 1843, the business not paying, Dr. Wells desired to dissolve the copartnership, which suggestion was accepted, and the business closed. To show the good feeling which existed at the time be-

under the present circumstances, for the reason that our receipts will barely pay the cost of materials used, even if we had ever so much work at the prices you have taken those jobs now on hand.

"I am satisfied in my own mind that our enterprise will be a total failure, so let us give it up and jog along here at home as usual. In case you do not give up the enterprise, I, of course, am ready, and do give you notice that I wish to get out of it as soon as our agreement will permit. I wish you to understand that I have not the least fault to find with you. I have the utmost confidence in you as a gentleman, and one who will ever aim to act your part well in accordance with strictest honor and integ-

city. We have both exerted ourselves to the utmost, and I believe that our ill-success cannot be attributed to either of us, so far as *go-aheaditiveness* is concerned."

Thus it will be seen that, in the last of November, 1843, neither Dr. Wells nor Dr. Morton had discovered Anæsthesia; for, had they done so, they would have had plenty of business, and no necessity of a dissolution of copartnership. At this time Dr. Morton was making his experiments in etherization, but had not brought his theories to a practical *demonstration*, which is the only test of any theory.

Dr. Morton realized that he re-

in March, 1844, enter his name as a medical student in a physician's office in Boston, and the Medical School of Harvard University, and commenced his studies. Thus far all went well, and the prospect was bright.

In May of the same year, Dr. Morton was united in marriage with Miss Elizabeth Whitman, the beautiful and talented daughter of Edward Whitman, Esq., of Farmington, Conn., one of the old and highly-respected families of that State. Miss Whitman was a very attractive lady, possessing more than ordinary accomplishments. The union was a very happy one,



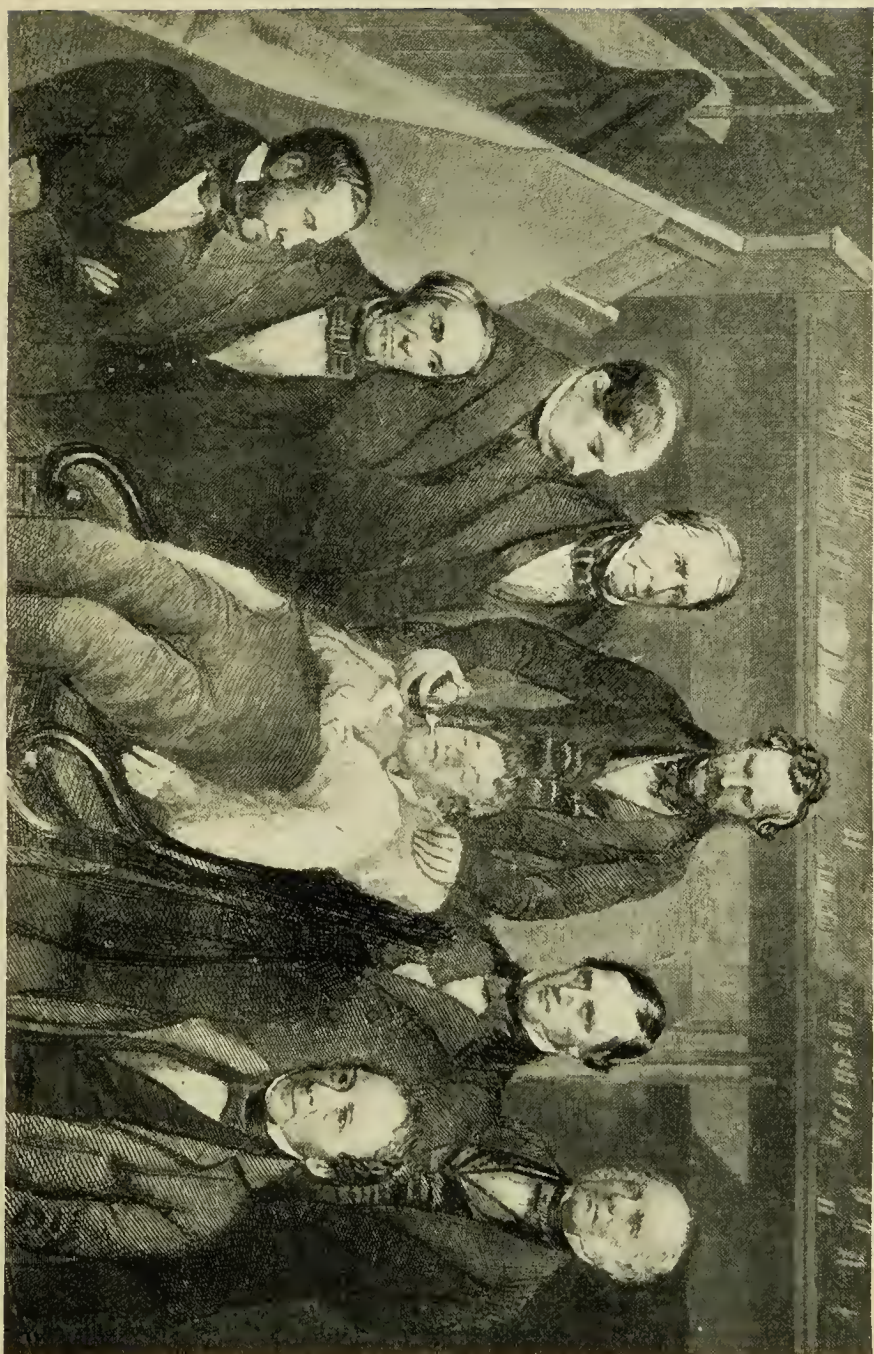
Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, Mass.

quired a fuller knowledge of chemistry to prosecute his work successfully. There were some points in regard to apparatus with which to handle the ether which he deemed important to know, and for that purpose he applied to the late ex-Mayor Wightman, of Boston, a scientific man, for information; who, in turn, advised Dr. Morton to go to Dr. Charles T. Jackson, who was at that time State Assayer. Accepting the kindly advice of Mr. Wightman Dr. Morton did,

and in the sore trials and persecutions which Dr. Morton was called upon to bear she was ever a staff to lean upon; and she cheered him with her counsel and her affection in the darkest hours.

During the years 1844 and 1845 Dr. Morton pursued his studies and his experiments with a tireless energy which at last was crowned with a brilliant success. In the meantime, Dr. Horace Wells had attended, in Hartford, some "laughing gas" exhibitions by Dr. G. Q.





Dr. Morton Making the First Public Demonstration of Etherization at the Massachusetts General Hospital, Surrounded by the Medical Staff of that Institution

Colton. Having observed that one Dr. Cooley had, while under the influence of the nitrous oxide gas, had his legs injured without knowing it or experiencing a sense of pain until after his attention had been called to it, he remarked, "that he believed a man might have his leg cut off without knowing it, under the gas influence." Thereupon, Wells said that he thought a person could have a tooth pulled without pain, proposing to take the gas and have the experiment tried upon himself, which he did, and declared it was painless; upon this single experiment he claimed the discovery, although Dr. Crawford W. Long, of Georgia, claimed to have done more than Wells in 1842, antedating him by two years.

Wells went to Boston and New York to demonstrate his claim before some eminent surgeons, but all his attempts were pronounced failures.

To-day, in the city of Hartford, Conn., a city of great culture and refinement, one of its public squares is desecrated by a bronze tablet, erected in honor of Horace Wells, as the discoverer of painless surgery. Is any comment necessary?

I have introduced this brief chapter in the life of Dr. Wells to save the necessity of doing so later in this paper, and because he had been connected in business with Dr. Morton. With the permission of the reader I will now return to the narrative of Dr. Morton.

During the progress of his experiments in etherization in 1845 Dr. Morton had learned that rubbing sulphuric ether upon the gums and mucous membrane would produce local insensibility, and from that he reasoned that if he only possessed the requisite knowledge the whole system might be

so saturated with the ether as to make it insensible to pain and suffering; and one day he exclaimed to Professor A. A. Gould, the distinguished naturalist, "I will have some way yet by which I will perform my operations without pain.\*"

#### THE FIRST SUCCESSFUL DEMONSTRATION

"BOSTON, September 30, 1846.

"This is to certify that I applied to Dr. Morton, at nine o'clock this evening, suffering under the most violent toothache; that Dr. Morton took out his pocket-handkerchief, saturated it with a preparation of his, from which I breathed for about a half minute, and then was lost in sleep. In an instant more I awoke, and saw the tooth lying upon the floor. I did not experience the slightest pain whatever. I remained twenty minutes in his office afterward, and felt no unpleasant effects from the operation.

"EBEN H. FROST.

"42 Prince Street, Boston."

"We witnessed the above operation, and the statement is in all respects correct; and what is more, the man asked where his tooth was, or if it was out.

"A. G. TENNEY, *Journal Office*.

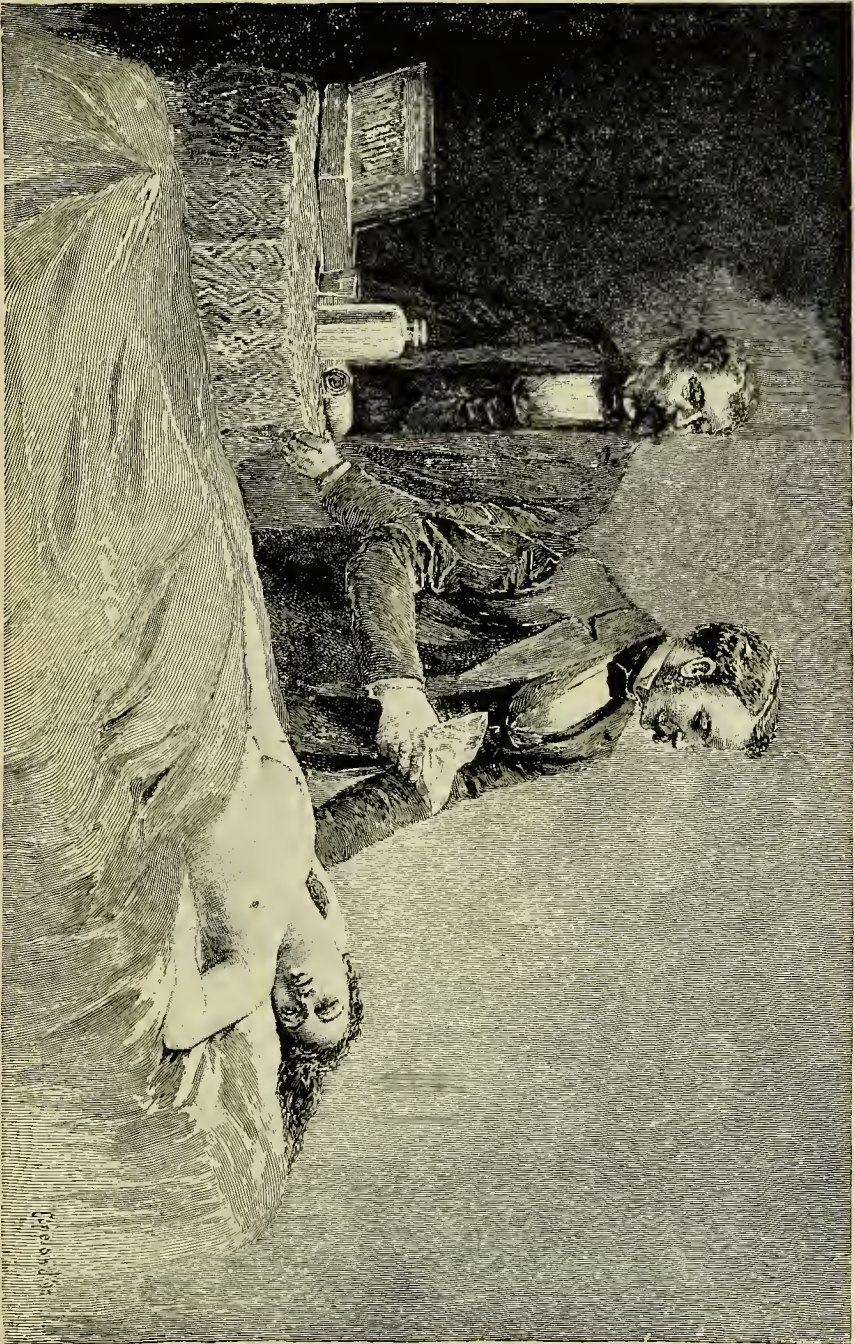
"G. HAYDEN, Surgeon Dentist."

The drawing of Mr. Frost's tooth was the initial operation which preceded the grand demonstration at the Massachusetts General Hospital, on the morning of October 16, 1846, and from which the birth of Anæsthesia is recorded and painless surgery first known to the world.

What a day was that for history—what a day was that for all mankind—and what a proud day was the sixteenth day of October, 1846, for William Thomas Green Morton? In that hour of his triumph where were Long, Wells, and Jackson? Where were their boasted dis-

\* Sworn testimony of Dr. Augustus A. Gould, the naturalist.





The Greatest Discovery by Man

coveries—where? They were not known or worth the knowing.

The proceedings at the Massachusetts General Hospital were intensely interesting and full of dramatic action. My pen has not the power to adequately describe and do justice to them.

The large amphitheatre was

begged for mercy and deliverance to be tortured by the surgeon's knife, while fond parents, relatives, and friends looked on with bleeding hearts.

In the operating-chair was a patient to undergo a serious and dangerous operation of the neck; upon him was to be demonstrated—

*My dear Sir,*

*Few persons have  
or had better reason than myself  
to assert the claim of Dr. Morton  
to the introduction of artificial  
anesthesia into surgical practice.*

*This precious gift to humanity  
went forth from the operating theatre  
of the Massachusetts General Hospital  
and the man to whom the world  
owes it is Dr. William Thomas Green Morton.*

*Yours very truly  
O. W. Holmes*

Fac-simile of Parts of a Letter Written by Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes

crowded with an anxious audience who were gathered to witness the promised experiments which were to introduce a new era in surgery. Men, women, and little children were no longer to be bound upon the operating-table, and while they

or exploded—painless surgery. The celebrated surgeon, Dr. John C. Warren, with a board of the most eminent surgeons in the State, were gathered around the sufferer; — all is ready — the stillness is oppressive.





*Wm. L. Morton M.D.*

A young man enters from a side door,—all eyes are upon him—he hesitates for a moment—it is the moment of fate—his face speaks for him—it is a frank and manly face, well marked with intelligence and dignity. He scans the faces of those whose gaze is fixed upon him,—it is a fearful ordeal. Dr. Warren breaks the spell by saying in a strong voice, "Well, sir, your patient is ready."

With a slight apology for his

consciousness; to all questions he replies that "he felt no pain." Dr. Warren, who has been most skeptical, turned to the audience, and in a most impressive tone, said: "Gentlemen, this is no humbug."

The next moment Dr. Morton was a hero, and all crowded around him with their congratulations. From that hour the operating-table and the surgeon's knife had lost their terror; and the world



Etherton Cottage, at Wellesley, Mass., the Home of Dr. Morton

tardiness the young man comes forward, and with a few assuring words to the patient, he proceeds to etherize him. In a few minutes he was prepared for the surgeon's knife. "Your patient is ready," said Dr. Morton to Dr. Warren. The next moment the scalpel entered the flesh, and Dr. Warren, grasping a bunch of veins, is extirpating the tumor;—the lookers-on have become statues, so immovable are they—the silence is profound—the work is done. Gradually the patient returns to con-

sciousness; to all questions he replies that "he felt no pain."

Over land and over sea the glad tidings spread. The trustees of the Massachusetts General Hospital presented Dr. Morton with a silver box, containing one thousand dollars, with the following inscription upon it:

TO  
DR. WILLIAM T. G. MORTON:

The silver casket accompanying this note was executed by Messrs.

Jones, Low & Ball, and bore the following inscription: In front—

TESTIMONIAL IN HONOR  
OF THE  
ETHER DISCOVERY  
OF  
SEPTEMBER 30TH, 1846.

And on the lid—

THIS BOX  
Containing One Thousand Dollars,  
IS PRESENTED TO  
**WILLIAM THOMAS GREEN MORTON**  
By the Members of the  
BOARD OF TRUSTEES  
OF THE  
MASSACHUSETTS GENERAL HOSPITAL,  
AND OTHER CITIZENS OF BOSTON,  
May 8, 1848.

*"He has become poor in a cause which has made  
the world his debtor."*

Dr. Morton's great success aroused the greed and avarice of several persons, who claimed that they had antedated him in his discovery of Anæsthesia, and then the war began, and was waged with relentless fury. Slander, malice, and venom worked by day and by night to poison the public mind, and to drag him down to their own level. There were three other principal claimants for the honor of the discovery and the coveted reward. Dr. Crawford W. Long, of Atlanta, Ga.; Horace Wells, of Hartford, Conn.; and Dr. Charles T. Jackson, of Boston.

The first of these three, Dr. Long, was a very respectable physician, who acknowledged over his own signature, that the discovery *did not bide his time*, and that others more fortunate had an-

ticipated him and won the prize.

Horace Wells's claims have already been alluded to in this paper.

In regard to Dr. Jackson all that he claimed was that he suggested to Dr. Morton that he should use sulphuric ether instead of nitrous oxide gas, which was disproved by the sworn testimony of ex-Mayor Wightman, the Hon. Joseph Burnett, Hon. Caleb Eddy, and Theodore Metcalf, all of Boston; but had his statement been true a suggestion is not a discovery in science. Dr. Jackson was a most vindictive man; he endeavored to wrest the discovery of the Morse electro-telegraph, but was defeated by the Hon. Amos Kendall, late Postmaster-General of the United States.

Dr. Morton petitioned Congress for a reward for his discovery of Anæsthesia, and his petition was favorably acted upon, and would have been granted, the committee having recommended an appropriation of one hundred thousand dollars for that purpose, which was only defeated by the extraordinary conduct and opposition of Dr. Charles T. Jackson, of Boston, and the Hon. Truman Smith, United States Senator from Connecticut. They succeeded but too well in their work, but justice will not always sleep.

Some of the most eminent men in this country were enlisted on the side of Morton, and the evidence in his favor was overwhelming, but circumstances and the basest falsehood triumphed for the time over truth and justice; but the day is at hand when the American people will honor Dr. Morton for his priceless services in the cause of humanity.

Among the distinguished persons who raised their voices for the rightful claimant may be named, the Hon. Daniel Webster, Rufus





Monument to Dr. Morton, in Mount Auburn Cemetery

Choate, Hon. Horace Mann, Marcus Morton, Charles Sumner, Professor Louis Agassiz, Henry J. Bigelow, M. D., Hon. Caleb Eddy, R. H. Dana, Esq., and many others.

Hundreds of physicians in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia signed petitions in favor of Dr. Morton, recommending that a large fund be raised for his personal benefit. The best intentions were thwarted, Dr. Morton was

vilified, and every conceivable means was employed to ruin and destroy his reputation. Under the most painful mental and physical strain Dr. Morton toiled on, hoped on, believing that a little time *must* and would vindicate him from the foul aspersions of those who sought his destruction.

"Hope deferred maketh the heart sick;" and so it proved in Dr. Morton's case. He had abandoned his business in seeking jus-





Mrs. William T. G. Morton

tice from Congress,—he had become poor, his health was broken, and, his spirits weighted with sorrow, he faltered by the wayside. Disease had fastened its fangs upon his vital system, and he was no longer able to continue the unequal fight. Through all the years of conflict his devoted wife had been his support, and had shared with him his anguish and his defeats.

All battles must have an end ;

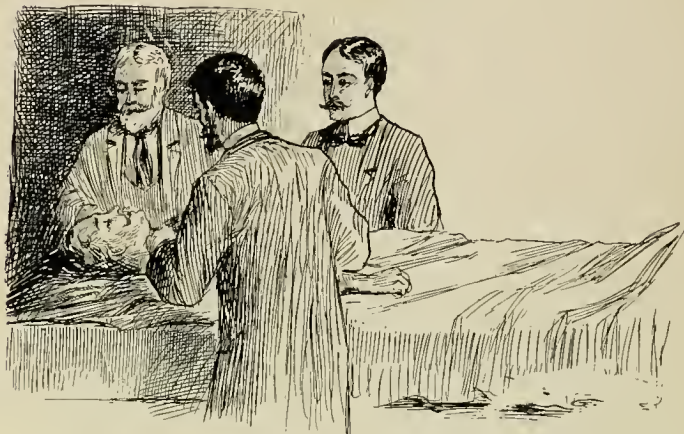
so must the victor and the vanquished lie down together in death.

On July 15, 1868, Dr. Morton complained of being ill,—went to ride in Central Park with his wife, and while on their return, when near the gates, he complained of severe distress. He got out of the carriage, sat down beside the walk, soon became unconscious, and was carried to St. Luke's Hospital, but was dead before reaching it.

It was a sad ending to a life which had been devoted to alleviating the sufferings of his fellow men.

After the lapse of forty years general attention is again being called to Dr. Morton and his price-

less discovery ; and it is believed that the time is very near at hand when this great Republic will honor itself in doing justice and homage to William Thomas Green Morton, M. D.



Accession no.

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Author

Hayden, W.R.

Discovery of  
ether.

Call no.

ANESTHESIA

